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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on similarities in the lives of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky to enlighten study of their pedagogies and to provide some information for current classroom techniques. Neither man had a great deal to say about his early life, although Piaget published an autobiography. A number of primary sources were used to construct the timeline that shows similarities in the lives of these two theorists. The environments in which they grew up and lived impelled them to bring to their research efforts a personal background that gave birth to their research and influenced its scope and perspective. The timeline traces the course of both men's lives from birth to death, marking the publication of many of their pedagogical works. (Contains 15 references.) (SLD)

A Biographic Comparison Tracing the Similarities in the lives of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky

By Susan Pass

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AERA: Similarities in the Lives of Piaget and Vygotsky
Susan Pass, Ed.D

The pedagogical legacies of both Piaget and Vygotsky remain to be rediscovered in the light of their similarities, pondered, and applied anew for the suitable education of America's youth in the 21st century. Both Piaget and Vygotsky wrote pedagogues that evolved from environments both personal and societal. These events drew forth both men's most deeply ingrained attitudes about their own identities and their most strongly held values and beliefs about personal conduct and education.

To explore this thesis, history will serve as a tool functioning toward greater understanding of the major ideas contained in both cultural-historical theory and genetic epistemology as they apply to American education. Since no comparative biographical study has yet been done on both men, scholars have missed the significance of adversity in both Piaget's and Vygotsky's lives. Yet, this determinant has an important message for either students suffering from adversity or teachers attempting to help them.

Educational philosophies become more vivid in a historical study. This focus on the similarities in the lives of both men can offer a unique opportunity to enlighten scholars on the personal origins of their ideas, provide information for present classroom techniques, and offer predictions for future pedagogical trends. Methodology can eliminate most problems, but not all, in historical work.

Bias is very difficult to completely eliminate. For example, the facts themselves might be biased (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1983, p. 799). Because those writing on Vygotsky could not reveal completely all that they honestly knew for fear of harm from a Communist government, published information on Vygotsky may be biased. Because this work must deal with published, public information, some biographical facts might not be

included. Furthermore, earlier information on Vygotsky was destroyed when the Germans destroyed his hometown, Gomel, during World War II.

In addition, information on Piaget also appears to be biased in that much of it views him in a positive way. His father was prominent enough to protect him through young adulthood. Thus, reporting that Piaget was in the mountains at tubercular sanitariums covered up two hospitalizations for mental anxiety. Piaget himself contributed to the information available through five autobiographies that served to not only explain his life but also commend himself to history. The Swiss also laud Piaget as a "favorite son" and have not rushed to harm his record.

Although Vygotsky authored or co-authored six books and 180 papers before he died at the age of 37 in 1934, in none of them did he discuss personal matters. Instead, his published works included only his pedagogical ideas and the research proving those ideas correct. Additionally, Vygotsky shared few of his pedagogical ideas or opinions with members of his family or with his friends. Perhaps this apparent secrecy was because, during the time of Stalin's repression, Vygotsky might have wanted to protect his family and friends. While purges were endemic, the less Vygotsky's loved ones knew about ideas which Stalin opposed, the safer it was for them. In any case, the focus of all of Vygotsky's published works seemed to be purely professional.

Of the few biographies published on Vygotsky, only one discussed how Vygotsky said his personal life impacted his ideas. Even there, the lone comment that Vygotsky did make was on the origin of only one idea. Although Vygotsky's parents created zones of proximal development for their children and Vygotsky later created them for Gomel, Vygotsky credited the idea for the term "zone of proximal development" or ZPD to the

American Dorothea McCarthy (Kozyurev & Turko, 1935). McCarthy, however, gave only the term. It was Vygotsky who created the concept. Nevertheless, Semen Dobkin, Vygotsky's childhood friend; A.N. Leont'ev; a longtime colleague; and Gita Vygodskaya, his eldest daughter, did provide some information.

She remembered her father as a very busy man who always made time for his children and shared his crowded study with them. At the end of the Cold War, Vygotsky's eldest daughter wrote a paper about her father that reported nothing on what motivated him to create cultural-historical theory. She also opened up a closet in her Moscow apartment to westerners that housed her father's personal papers. There was little personal information in her father's papers, so searching for other sources on Vygotsky's life was one of the challenges of this work.

In contrast, there are four biographies and four autobiographies on the longer-living Piaget. Jean Piaget lived until 1980 and was a prolific author writing over 50 books, 180 major studies, 500 papers, 37 volumes in the series Etudes d'Epistemologie Genetique, and published, brief autobiographies. He wrote a short autobiography in 1952, A History of Psychology in Autobiography, which gave some personal information on his understanding of how he conceived his ideas. Two other short autobiographies were to follow, but they were mainly restatements of the first.

Then, in 1976, a more definitive autobiography was published in Revue Europeenne des Sciences Sociales that expanded upon his motivation for creating genetic epistemology. Piaget also provided material for Christine Nasso, who authored a brief biography on him in Contemporary Authors in 1969. Additionally, Piaget published two works refuting biographers whose interpretations on the origins of his pedagogical ideas

with which he disagreed. Outside of these publications, there is little information available as to how Piaget conceived his ideas and no work that encompasses the origins of more than a few of his pedagogical ideas.

Even in his autobiography, Piaget was not prolific in this regard. This silence could have been due to modesty, assuming that he believed the world was more interested in his ideas than in him, or perhaps, deep down, Piaget really loved his parents and wanted to protect their memory. Despite this, enough primary and secondary facts were obtainable through on-line retrieval over the World Wide Web and through personal e-mail correspondences with sources in America, Russia, Switzerland, England, and New Zealand to provide sufficient information for this work.

In summation, there were sufficient primary and secondary sources to conduct this study. This study is based on the belief that more than just a researcher conducting inquires on emerging hard facts on a whim creates theory. "No one creates in a vacuum" (Bruner, 1967, p. 3). Vygotsky lived in a milieu of state-controlled ideas upon intellectual thought while Piaget's work reflected the intellectual environment of a free society. These different environments impelled both Vygotsky and Piaget to bring to their research efforts a personal background that not only gave birth to their research but also influenced its scope and perspective.

To easily observe the similarities in the lives of both men, the reader is asked to look at the attached timeline.

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PIAGET

Born 8/9
at
Neuchatel

Born 11/5
at
Orsha

Moved
to
Gomel

Zinaida
(sister)
born

VYGOTSKY

created
"Autovap"

"Our Birds"

"Un Moineau
Albionos"

"Rameau de Sapin"

articles on mollusks

+Bedot offers him
curator's job

+Godet dies

+finds Sabatier book
in father's study

+confirmation lessons

First crisis -
RELIGIOUS

influenced by studying
Bovet, Darwin, & Kant

demonstrates interest in birds, fossils, seashells

volunteer - Neuchatel Museum of Natural History
member-Jura Clu
member: Friends of Nature

Elementary school

Neuchatel Latin School

1896

1897

1902

1903

1904

1905

1906

1907

1908

1909

1910

1911

1912

Tutored by Ashapiz

taught by Shpet

Gymnasium

Influenced by Father's love of Spinoza, Hegel and Kant, Mother's love of literature

Parents run Gomel ZPD

+Bar mitzvah

forms his first ZPD in Gomel with Troika: Dobkin, David, Lev, Zi

Father tried and
acquitted for
defending
Gomel during
Czarist pogrom



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Honorary
Doctorate
Harvard

studies his own children

Professor of History of Scientific Thought at University of Geneva

Professor of Experimental Psychology at University of Geneva -- 1940-71

Professor of Sociology at University of Geneva

Professor of Experimental Psychology and Sociology at University of Lausanne

1934

1935

1936

1937

1938

1939

1940

1941

1942

1943

1944

1945

+Stalin puts
Vygotsky
on trial for
"political error"

Stalin

Hospitalized for tuberculosis

Betrayal of Luria and Leontiev

Offered possibility of heading a section on Exp. Med. at All Union Institute of Exp. Med.

Tries to get "Thinking & Speech" smuggled out to Piaget

+Vygotsky dies before trial -- June 11

1945	1946	1947	1948	1949	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956
Professor of Experimental Psychology at University of Geneva -- 1940-71						Professor of Genetic Psychology at Sorbonne -- 1952-63					
Professor of Sociology at University of Geneva						Professor of Experimental Psychology and Sociology at University of Lausanne					
<div> <div> "Traite de Logique"</div> <div>Honory Doctorate U. of Brussels</div> <div>Professor Honoris Causa U. of Brazil</div> </div> <div> <div>"Plays, Dreams, & Imitation in Childhood"</div> <div>"Introduction a la epistemologie genetique"</div> <div>Member Executive Council UNESCO</div> </div> <div> <div>"Origins of Intelligence in the Child"</div> <div>"Child's Conception of Number"</div> <div>+ Stalin dies</div> </div> <div> <div>"Construction of Reality in the Child"</div> <div>(Genetic Epistemology)</div> </div>											
<div> <div>STALIN</div> <div>+ Stalin dies</div> </div>											

"Growth of
Logical
Thinking"

Honorary
Doctorate
Cambridge

Writes
commentary of
Vygotsky's 1926
"Thinking
and Speech"

Director of International Center for Genetic Epistemology -- 1955-80

Professor of Experimental Psychology at University of Geneva -- 1940-71

Professor of Genetic Psychology at Sorbonne -- 1952-63

1957

1958

1959

1960

1961

1962

1963

1964

1965

1966

"Logique et Connaissance scientifique"		Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award APA		"Biology and Knowledge"		"Main Trends in Psychology"		"Recherches sur l'abstraction reflechissante"	
Director of International Center for Genetic Epistemology -- 1955-80				Eresum Prize		Dir.Int'l Bureau of Education discovers socio-political issues in education			
Professor of Experimental Psychology at University of Geneva -- 1940									
				Honorary Doctorate U. of Bristol		Emeritus Professor at University of Geneva			
1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976

					"Intelligence and Affectivity" published posthumously
	Dir., International Center for Genetic Epistemology				
					+dies Sept 16
	Emeritus Professor at University of Geneva				
	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981

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